

DISENTANGLING PRIVACY AND INTIMACY: INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP, PRIVATE BOUNDARIES AND PUBLIC TRANSGRESSIONS

PAUL REYNOLDS

Abstract: Recent theorisations of transformations of intimacy—like Ken Plummer's (2003) *Intimate Citizenship* project—concentrate on social and cultural transformations that erode the containment of intimacy within the private sphere. They have less to say about the character of and oppositions to that erosion, and specifically how far the idea of the private stands in opposition to intimacy transgressing into the public. In this essay, the private is explored through its constitutive features—liberal codifications of rights, liberty and property, medico-moral discourses and conservative values and legal and political regulation—to give a more political and critical reading. This reading suggests that an explicit disentangling of the private and the intimate is necessary if tendencies toward public and emancipated intimacies are to become meaningful transformations, and this involves a dissembling of and critical engagement with the powerful historically entrenched idea of privacy in western societies.

Keywords: privacy; intimacy; transgression; transformation; liberalism.

Ken Plummer's (2003) *Intimate Citizenship* is one of a number of recent works arguing that contemporary socio-cultural transformations are fundamentally eroding the divide between the private and public and thereby creating the possibilities for public, democratic and plural forms of intimate life. One question that arises from this argument is how these transformations of intimacy redraw the boundaries of private and public worlds. The prevailing view—never explicitly argued—appears to be that change renders private and public as descriptive binary representations of porous and plural zones of experience and relationships. Yet this overlooks the division of private and public as not merely a descriptive feature of the claimed “exhaustion” of modernity, but part of a politicised discursive project arising from the formation and development of capitalist (patriarchal) modernity as a particular form of organising economy and society. This short discussion argues that a necessary feature of the transformation of intimacy is an explicit deconstruction of the private. This is more than a lexical question. It sees the private as an explicitly politicised space that defends exploitative, oppressive and alienating constructions and subjugations of intimacy, necessarily separated from the public as part of the defence of those interests who benefit from them. Disentangling intimacy and privacy and deconstructing the private and privacy as a social category are necessary features of redrawing a more democratised and emancipating map of intimate life.

Intimate Citizenship

The idea of intimate citizenship emerged within the context of a *fin de siècle* claim that the modern separation of private and the public was blurring and breaking down. Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) charts the development of the reflexive self both as a consequence of and in contradiction with the institutions of modernity that colonise intimate life. He argues for a deconstruction of modern intimacy to reject its containment, and the sequestration of its experience within controlling and limiting discourse, within modern societies. This involves making a “life politics” characterised by the “plasticity” of sexuality and intimate life. Bauman (2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007) has argued that in “liquid modernity”, the new intersections of private and public life require a broader deconstruction of private individuation, consumption, community, intimacy and politics to address the present age of uncertainty and fear with the potential for emancipation and a new ethics of intimate relationships. These perspectives elide with recent developments in the literature of embodiment, which argue that modernity promotes disembodiment, where the individual has their body alienated and “othered” from them (Crossley 2001; Heyes 2007; Diprose 2002; Braidotti 2006). This ironic characteristic of a consumer society based on property ownership is broken down in late (or post-) modernity and intimacy is established at the core of emancipating relations and reflexivity’s between embodied selves.

Plummer’s (2003) intimate citizenship is a product of a number of social and cultural transformations: the impact of developing information and communication technologies; transformations of private structures such as the family; new intersections between private and public discursive sites and institutions, such as the media; and emergent articulations of diverse identities, selfhoods and relationships in public spaces destabilised the private-public divide. Equally, the practices and representational politics of specific diverse identities — particularly gendered and sexual—were strategically transgressing and eroding key aspects of private-public boundaries as a condition of their emergence. The distinctive nuance—not always recognised in the literature—between the two is telling. The former implies shifting boundaries through the momentum of changing structural and cultural conditions, whilst the latter focuses on particular agents and the impact of their struggles for emancipation and liberation. Non-heteronormative and counter-patriarchal identities acted to challenge the conceptual constructions that bound private and public by their very conditions of being, identifying the private realm as a structuring agent for oppressive and prejudicial practices and a silencing of voice and imposing of invisibility upon them.

Within this conceptualisation of change, private lives, experiences and decisions are increasingly represented and articulated in new public spaces, conjoined with public institutions, and lived in public relationships. This challenges modern social and cultural structures, institutions and discursive milieu that subjugate intimacy within the private realm and facilitates moments of transgression that signpost possibilities for the emergence into being of “public intimacies”. Plummer refers to intimate citizenship as a “work in progress” (2003, 139), highlighting its uneven development in social and cultural institutions, processes and practices, its emergent status as a tendency or partial development within different sections and strata in society, and unfinished theorisation and conceptualisation. Influenced by phenomenology and social interactionism, he locates the emergence of these

tendencies for public intimacy within local collective discursive initiatives—such as telling sexual stories of trauma and experience in abuse survivor groups (Plummer 1995)—and their potential to transgress and change public discourse.

Intimate citizenship provides a conceptual framing for transgressive discursive re-articulations and practices that challenge the private containment of intimacy and provide the tools for remodelling intimacy as a public discourse and practice, beyond private structures. These public intimacies are reflected in political struggles for minority rights, human rights and the legitimacy of radical identities (such as non-heteronormative and non-binary gender determined sexual identities—BDSMers, bisexuals, transsexuals) (Phelan 1997; Wilchins 1997; Rahman 2000; Monro 2005).

The intimate embraces an ensemble of relations and connections: with themselves as a subject of discourse and self-reflective agent in making a distinctive, flourishing self-identity; with others, be they family, friends, lovers, work colleagues and others whose lives have a direct reciprocating relationship without mediation upon the subject; and with the environment, the civic, the cultural, the political, the spiritual and other mediating domains within which the subject acts and is acted upon. Where the intimate is distinctive is in its bringing into these relationships the sensory, the emotional and the affective—those embodied and phenomenological qualities often “written out” of rationalist constructions of public life, or subjugated and ordered by public institutions such as the state, media, church, medical establishment and industry. It follows that the power of an idea of intimate citizenship is its redrawing of what it means to be a subject of, and within, a civic context. The intimate is “written into” public discourse and provides a critical agenda for flourishing both within the subject and the wider public milieu. For intimate citizenship to emerge as something that is experienced, recognised and transformative of social relations, structures, institutions, processes and practices, the very nature of intimacy in relation to private and public realms has to be reconceived and re-valorised within ethical and emancipating discourse.

Yet the private is not a passive category. The discursive construction of the private realm restricts and constrains intimacy. Its representation in the public realm is reified, fetishised, commodified and objectified—distortions common to the discursive construction of the private in the public realm as pathological, product, spectacle or ideology. The private-public divide is precisely constructed to mediate the intimate away from the emotional and the affective and towards the service of public priorities of profit, acquisition, exploitation and consumption, readily evident in studies of sexual politics (Evans 1993; Field 1995; Bell and Binnie 2000; Hennessy 2000). The private realm is not something that can be simply redrawn discursively, or routinely transgressed from, or reformulated to be more plastic or liquid. Intimate citizenship not only liberates the intimate from its private shackles, it transforms public discourse. For that, the private needs to be dissembled and purged.

Private and Privacy

The private, and privacy, has a number of contradictory and culturally distinctive meanings. Private can be replaced synonymously with confidential, personal, secret, concealed and undisclosed. These everyday usages metaphorically associate “the private”

with the characteristics of how people might wish to experience and have control over their intimate lives. The connection of privacy with the protection of intimacy and freedom gives the concept power in the construction of models of ethical, democratic and free societies (Inness 1992; DeCew 1997).

This power is juxtaposed with a dissonance between the concept in everyday usage and the concept as specifically articulated in a “private realm” as contrasted with a “public” realm within society. The descriptive generality of the former provides a screen for the specific nature of the latter. The private-public boundary provides a neat structuring discourse for the individual to be separated from and in juxtaposition with social structures, institutions, processes and practices. This separation allows for a reification of the individual as a self-conscious, autonomous and distinctive agency for whom freedom is a self-referent to flourishing. This is most apparent within liberal discourse, where the individual is free to choose within the market to acquire and own property as an intrinsic part of self-referential development (MacPherson 1962, 1977; Gray 1986; Manent 1994; Reiman 1976). Against this is a notion of the radical subject in public society, where self-consciousness, agency and distinctiveness are mediated through relationships other social subjects and the structures, institutions, processes and practices that shape and determine, yet at the same time are subject to the agency of subjects to transgress and transform (Humm 1992; Schecter 1994; Meister 1990).

Privacy is constitutive of the individual and their intimate lives—constitutive because the private demarks and defines the boundary between the individual and the other. This has been evident in philosophical discourse as far back as Aristotle’s (1995) distinction between *polis* and *oikos*. It is precisely this sort of distinction—which Aristotle reported based on a strict descriptive division between the “common” and the “household” in Athens—that is reified to a central and necessary boundary between the intimate and the communal. Other less confining distinctions could be offered between what is experienced as intimate and which is subject of “common” and therefore mediated relationships with others (other subjects and/or structures, processes, institutions and practices as “others” and “othering” agents). Three critical distinctions might be: imminent/immediate to the subject and mediated through others, to reflect the spatial and temporal nature of how intimacy and communalitly differently is experienced: disclosed and undisclosed, to reflect what can remain confided within specific relations and that which is shared through mediating relationships, institutions and processes with others; and personal and public in respect of issues of ownership, jurisdiction and the balance of contingency and constraint in exercising rights, engaging with equality (whether losing or gaining) and being a part of just social solutions to problems. All of these say more about the relationship between what is intimate or common than the particular framing of the private/public distinction in modern societies. None are simply lexical “sleight of hand”, since they draw upon specific distinctions and differences and do not necessarily pose boundaries between them.

Nevertheless, privacy and the private are hegemonic in demarking a boundary between what is held as intimate and what is regarded as part of common associations and relationships. The civic arena, inherently public as a space, is constituted within dominant liberal ideas where prefigured individuals meet to exercise their choices and exchanges, rather than a constitutive space of common structures, institutions, processes and practices

which subjects populate. Likewise, citizenship discourse often starts from a conventional model of the individual juxtaposed with state and civil society, a principal structure of which is the market, (Turner 1986; Barbalet 1988; Marshall and Bottomore 1992) and seeks to explore its limits and transformative possibilities, where the individual's identities are constitutive problems in respect of access, inclusion, rights, equality and justice.

It is possible for intimate citizenship to rearticulate intimacy beyond the private but it stands against this hegemonic edifice. Privacy, in everyday language use and specific historical articulations of social, cultural, political and economic relationships, has developed a specific containment of intimacy within a zone of private exploitation, oppression and closure of the intimate from the public.

The Private and Western Societies

Privacy in western societies brings together three discourses that are complementary and contradictory in their interconnectedness, providing a “normalised” valoration of the private/public distinction in modern societies. These discourses defined the public as either the apparatus for protecting the “status quo” or as a means of “othering”—where the public is distinctive by what it is not. What is constituted in the private sphere provides for the flourishing of the human subject, whereas the public represents a limited space of obligation and commitment to higher ideals—such as nation or empire—or the defence of cultural values and practices in “private” civil society. It was only expanded in times of challenge or crisis to those higher ideals or private lives.

Liberalism and the codification of rights—life, liberty and property—is a foundation for privacy, as the articulation of the individual and their rights under emergent capitalist modernity. The characterisation of articulation is important, because liberalism as an ideology should be disentangled from any *necessary* causality in the development of capitalist modernity. It is as much an apologia, a rationalisation and a justification of the nature of developments within capitalist modernity as it is an ideology that interpellates, inspires and compels. The contingency in its relationship to cultural, political and economic change is particularly evident in the way the individual is conceived as an agent whose proper engagement with the private will bring public virtue and wealth (Smith 1993; Mill 1991) aside and apart from and in contradiction with historical experience and empirical examples, such as the failures of the market and immiseration of workers despite entrepreneurial profit in the 1920's-30's and again in the 1980's.

The codification of the natural rights of life, liberty and property (Locke 1993), and the connection of individual liberty with private property and the role of the state in securing individual liberty and property (Mill 1991) defined the boundaries of public and private. Individuals were constituted by their liberties in the exercise of choice within the market and acquisition of private property as an extension of selfhood in civil society (MacPherson 1962). Private property and possession allows individuals to extend their autonomy from their individual acts to mould land, capital and others to their will. Privacy provides the space for the individual to inscribe themselves: through the patrilineal family; through standing in property and wealth, through duty and charity in entering into civic life and through the practice of spirituality and cultural (often national) values. These are the

traditional sites of intimate life, strictly owned by the liberal individual. The public realm, where government for “the people” manages and secures liberal values and conserves culture and social (bourgeois) structure through regulatory regimes of law and order, presents for the individual both a sphere for the acting out of public duty and at the same time a challenge to how far privacy should be intruded upon.

The dominance of medico-moral discourse over the construction of private and civic life is equally important. Medico-moral discourse refer to the blend of norms and values historically articulated first from the church and then from medical establishment in their roles of arbiters of the rules, risks and consequences of private transgression both for the individual in the private realm and for the individual as a civic subject (Mort 2000; Weeks 1981, 1985). Judeo-Christian morality propagated an entrenched homophobia and misogyny in their denial of physical pleasure in defence of sacred ecstasy and their ordering of intimacy within private lives according to scriptural teachings, defining virtue and sin and natural and unnatural behaviours and beliefs. Much of this prejudicial morality was imprinted within rather than excised by medical discourse in the enlightenment, where it was reinforced by pathological notions of health and illness, normality and abnormality and nature and unnaturalness. It retained the divide between the intimate private and the public. Where pathological intimacies, such as non-heterosexual sexuality or transgressive gendered behaviour, developed within the private realm of intimate practices, there was the problem of the public infection of illness spreading from the body to the body-politic. This was evident, for example, in the debilitating spread of sexual diseases amongst British troops that was attributed to the poor performance of British forces in the Crimea and the attendant fear of licentious behaviour impeding social order and work amongst the working classes in 19th Century Victorian England, which led to the “curative” Contagious Diseases Acts of 1861-1885 (Mort 2000). These medico-moral discourses had a conservative character in their values that allowed a degree of complementarity in their development alongside liberal capitalist modernity, particularly where the focus of regulation was the disciplining of the working class whilst the middle classes exempted themselves from the same systematic regulation of risk (hence the first exposition of commercial pornography and flagellation and whore houses serving the bourgeoisie in late Victorian Society). The propagation of moral discourse in modern societies extended from formal church teachings to other structures of the state and civil society, such as medicine and welfare provision. All were designed to propagate a moralised notion of a good intimate life whilst nominally preserving the private/public divide save for those (often the working class) who were unable to police themselves.

The development of legal and political regulation emerged with the imprint of both liberal capitalism and medico-moral discourse. Criminal law and legal regulations for social order both developed from the liberal notion of the role of the state in securing abundance and the nation (conserving its political—conservative—character) whilst disciplining the poor in securing subsistence and maintaining liberty as an articulation of the individuals aspirations to choice and acquire in market society, with limited state intervention. This role is essentially contradictory insofar as the preservation of the minimal public sphere is contradicted in order to ensure the conservative values propagated as the “correct” basis for intimacy. Regulatory discourse therefore require repeated sense of crisis in private lives and

the forging of counter-productive immoral, unhealthy or dangerous forms of intimacy that the state, exceptionally, was required to respond to. The Crimea crisis and the Contagious Diseases Act is one example of how this operates, periodic moral panics about “the underclass” and “families without fathers” and Conservative “family” firmly changes to welfare and social security policies in the UK are another (Lister 1996; Dennis and Erdos 1992).

Intimacy in this liberal model is contradictory in three respects. The individual is rendered an abstraction save for their characterisation in terms of liberal capitalism—as free choosing, acquisitive, competitive and possessive. Yet at the same time, successive liberal thinkers draw these “ciphers” in conservative bourgeois forms that associate them with the concrete cultural characteristics of middle class white and male values and identities—prescribing an intimate life they have no foundation for in their constitutive theory (for example Mill’s On Utilitarianism and the definition of utility within bourgeois values—Mill 1993). This contradiction in liberal ascriptions of identity becomes more pronounced with the emergence of identity politics and gendered, ethnic, disabled and sexual challenges, where the logic of *homo economicus* is at odds with these identities (Mill 2000). This extends to intimacy, where the liberal “cipher” effectively defines intimacy within private ownership and the individual whilst offering little ascription as to the ethical quality or content of intimacy. This is provided by what liberal capitalism permits—its absent presence—through conservative values that reinforces the subjugation of intimacy to private lives and devalues it in public discourse to a matter for the private individual.

At the same time, there is a contradiction between this insistence in intimacy being maintained in the private realm, and constant interventions to regulate the intimate from the public realm. The regulation of intimate relations and qualities are valorised by dominant conservative ideals in a way that alienates and “others” the individual from their selves unless there is conformity with those values. This can only be done through state and public apparatus that repress and subject the intimate lives of the subject to conformity and orthodoxy.

Finally there is the contradiction in the valorisation of the private as constitutive of the individual, where virtues and freedoms begin, and the denial of those virtues and freedoms in the public sphere. So, intimacy and the sensory, affective and sentimental features of its discourses are closed from the public, which is constituted by rationality, science and technology that is impoverished by its lack. This is illustrated in the repression of demonstrations of affection and love in public or their strict prescription within the contexts of established family forms or couples.

This overview presents a negative image of privacy and intimacy under liberalism. It might be argued that liberalism and privacy have a richer articulation of intimacy, or that the resistance to public intimacies by discourses of privacy is weaker than represented. Here the nuance of political resistance to the private by gendered and sexual identities as a condition of their being becomes more important. It signifies intimacy as a terrain of struggle rather than simply a subject of changed socio-cultural conditions, and recognises those subject to prejudicial discourse articulated through liberal societies who cannot—or only conditionally—enjoy their intimacies under the current private/public divide. This short sketch

may do little more than overview and tease an area of enquiry and struggle, requiring more detailed historical, conceptual and empirical discussion. For example, a further discursive distinction might be production and reproduction, and whether they are constituted by or constitutive of the liberal, medico-moral and legal/political discourses outlined. Regardless, the explicit critique of privacy is one task not yet adequately accounted for in the intimate citizenship project.

Conclusion

The Latin route of privacy—*privō*—can be translated as to deprive or rob. The intimate citizenship project and its transgression of private/public divisions emphasise to the impoverishing of both intimate and communal—public—space and living through the dominance of a particular historical constitution of the private/public divide, the individual and their ontological apologia for capitalist modernity. Whilst it is arguable that this is being eroded by contemporary social and cultural change, it is a decidedly apolitical assumption. The global resurgence of liberal politics and conservative social values in the 1980's and early 1990's and the normalising strategies that contain new gender and sexual identities suggest that the idea of privacy, entrenched in dominant ideals and everyday language, remains a boundary and counter to change or transgression. One clear signpost for this is the legal recognition of homosexuality but the parallel legitimacy of medico-moral prejudice than limit recognition, for example Christian agencies negativity towards gay couple's adoption and their debated exemption from human rights law.

For intimate citizenship and emergent public intimacies to flourish, it will be necessary to address both the linguistic and ideological power of the private and privacy. Otherwise, the intimate in public will take two courses. For the many, it will be mediated, commodified and fetishised, through market, state and media, merely a more complex form of its modern antecedent. For the few who can afford to transgress or completely “opt out” from private/public social values and institutions, it will be a limited and exceptional, marginal space. For those who see public intimacies as a means of common emancipation and enrichment to human flourishing, the private remains a potent political and ideological impediment.

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Department of Social and Psychological Sciences,
Edge Hill University,
St Helens Road,
Ormskirk,
Lancashire,
United Kingdom
Tel: 00441695584370
E-mail: reynoldp@edgehill.ac.uk